

Cultural Leadership Academy

Impact Report

Youth Democracy Institute



Presented By:
TRALONNE R. SHORTER
Founder & CEO



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Executive Summary

The Cultural Leadership Academy (CLA) pilot brought together Black and Jewish middle school students across Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. to explore shared histories of courage, oppression, and allyship — and to experience firsthand what unity across difference looks like in practice. Over three sessions, students examined pivotal moments from the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement, engaged in structured dialogue, collaborated in coalition teams, and ultimately stood before their families and two Arlington County Board members to present their policy arguments for a UNITY Bill of their choosing.

This report provides a clear picture of what the pilot achieved, what contributed to its success, what we learned operationally, and how this work aligns with YDI's broader mission and vision. It also outlines strategic opportunities for scaling and sustaining this track within YDI's core NextGen Leadership Academy.

Participant Insights

Strong turnout across all three days—even during a federal shutdown

The Academy registered 34 students and maintained 20–27 participants daily, outperforming national multisession retention norms (20–40% attrition on average; Afterschool Alliance). Students represented a nearly even mix of Black and Jewish youth, with several multi-ethnic participants. Attendance held strong amid sports conflicts, family obligations, and the closure of NMAAHC, requiring a pivot to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

- **Registered:** 34
- **Day 1:** 27
- **Day 2:** 25
- **Day 3:** 20
- **Demographics:** ~11–13 Black; ~11–14 Jewish

Reflection Insights

Student reflection cards from Day 3 reveal clear evidence of emotional and cognitive impact. Of the 13 students who submitted cards, many described feeling “enlightened,” “educated,” “informed,” or “knowledgeable about different cultures.” Their written takeaways frequently referenced the Holocaust Museum visit, including the shoe exhibit and survivor testimony. One 6th grader captured the spirit of the program by writing, *“After learning this, I know that it shouldn't happen again. Never giving up—continuing to push for laws to be changed.”* When asked about future participation, students responded: 3 “Yes,” 4 “Maybe/Not yet,” 1 “No,” and 5 did not specify. Collectively, their reflections affirm that the program deepened empathy, broadened historical understanding, and sparked meaningful civic curiosity.

What Worked Well

Delivering a three-day cross-cultural learning experience during a federal shutdown required flexibility, rapid coordination, and a thoughtful approach to program design. YDI developed a fully customized curriculum—grounded in accurate historical context, politically neutral framing, and age-appropriate activities—that blended history, leadership development, and hands-on civic practice. This required dozens of hours of research, content development, storyboard design, materials preparation, and logistical planning.

A Powerful and Well-Paced Museum Experience

The November 11 field trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) became one of the academy's strongest learning moments. Although the original plan included both the USHMM and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the federal government shutdown required us to pivot when NMAAHC closed. Choosing a single-museum visit ultimately worked to our advantage, allowing students to stay emotionally grounded and fully engaged. Using a structured scavenger hunt, students explored key exhibits, met a Holocaust survivor, and later demonstrated strong recall during Day 3 activities. Many named the “shoes exhibit” and survivor testimony as the most powerful parts of the entire program.

High-Quality Curriculum & Thoughtful Facilitation

The curriculum successfully balanced historical grounding, emotional processing, and active learning. Students connected deeply with stories from the Holocaust and Civil Rights Movement, including Anne Frank's diary, the loss of 1.5 million Jewish children, the 1963 Birmingham church bombing, and the Children's Crusade. The use of short films, reflection journals, and guided discussions helped students personalize the material while remaining within an age-appropriate, politically neutral framework.

Engagement Tools That Brought Learning to Life

The academy's blend of structured activities and hands-on learning—including the Walk in My Shoes policy comparison, pre-assigned coalition seating, the museum scavenger hunt, the UNITY Bill coalition exercise, and the closing Jeopardy review—created an environment where students could step into history, test ideas, and practice leadership with confidence. Even initially hesitant students became engaged as they moved between discussion, movement, and role-based tasks.

The mix of movement, storytelling, history, and agency created a well-balanced learning experience that resonated deeply across the three-day program.

Coalition-Based Learning Made History Real

The coalition model—policymakers, lawyers, clergy, youth organizers, storytellers, artists, and philanthropists—helped students understand that meaningful social change is always the work of many. As they examined and debated UNITY Bills, students demonstrated impressive collaboration, critical thinking, and public speaking skills. On Day 3, families and elected officials watched students present their arguments with confidence and maturity, often surprising their parents with how poised

and thoughtful they were. The exercise connected history to present-day civic action in a way that felt accessible, empowering, and age-appropriate.

Strong Community Presence & Parent Enthusiasm

The Day 3 showcase offered students a rare leadership moment. The showcase included two Arlington County Board members, JD Spain and Chair Takis Karantonis, reinforcing the real-world civic importance of the work. Their presence elevated the experience and demonstrated to families that this work matters to the broader community. Parents consistently expressed gratitude and a desire for more programming with many expressing interest in bringing the program to their social networks and faith-based youth groups.

Notable Feedback

- “My son had a ball!”
- “This is the kind of program our young people need especially for this age group since high school obligations limits students ability to participate in this type of program.”
- “How can I bring this to my community?”

Key Outcomes

Student Outcomes

- Increased empathy and cultural understanding
- Stronger public speaking, teamwork, and coalition skills
- Greater comfort engaging across racial and religious differences
- Formation of new friendships and intergroup connections
- Strong parent turnout and engagement
- Interest in future cohorts and expansion
- Referrals to other youth groups and community organizations

Community Outcomes

- Participation by 3 of 5 county leaders
- High demand for replication across youth-serving institutions
- Clear pathway for DMV expansion

Challenges and What We Learned

Federal Government Shutdown Required Rapid, Real-Time Adaptation

The program launched amid the federal government shutdown (Oct. 1–Nov. 12), which triggered major uncertainty for our planned November 11 museum day. The NMAAHC closed on October 12, and the USHMM operated week-to-week without guaranteed availability. This required nearly two weeks of contingency planning, including exploring a pivot to Richmond’s State Capitol and Holocaust Museum and making light curriculum adjustments in late October to prepare for either scenario.

Ultimately, Veterans Day closures limited Richmond options, and moving forward with a single-museum visit in D.C. proved to be the strongest model for this age group.

Balance Between Narratives

Although Day 2 delivered a powerful learning experience at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, anonymous student reflections suggest that the Jewish/Holocaust narrative had the most immediate impact. Because the NMAAHC visit was canceled due to the federal shutdown, students did not receive an equally immersive experience with African American history. It is possible that the absence of this second museum shaped how students reported their overall takeaways and whether they would return for future programming (responses included Yes: 3, Maybe: 4, Not Yet: 3, No: 1). This informs future curriculum balance and underscores the value of paired cultural experiences when exploring shared histories.

Cross-Jurisdictional Transportation Was More Complex Than Anticipated

While the bus from Arlington simplified logistics for most families, coordinating arrival and supervision for those meeting the group in D.C. required additional staff capacity. In future sessions, we will adopt a single unified meeting point or assign a dedicated point-person for families traveling separately.

Curriculum Adaptation Under Tight Timelines

Because the museum plan was unstable until November 6, curriculum for Day 2 required rapid modification. YDI integrated a new policy and coalition-building component tied to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and developed original UNITY Bills for student deliberation. This flexibility strengthened the program — but also revealed the need for more staffing in curriculum development when delivering multi-day academies.

Attendance Decline Was Predictable — and Typical

The pilot retained ~60% of students from Day 1 to Day 3, well above national norms for voluntary youth programs, particularly those spanning weekends and federal holidays. Sports conflicts and family obligations were the primary drivers of attrition, not program dissatisfaction.

This insight will guide future scheduling (e.g., summer programs, spring break, or afterschool sessions where conflicts are reduced).

Video Production Requires Additional Support

A videographer captured Day 1 and Day 3, but the final compiled reel is not yet ready. For future multi-day academies, a dedicated editor will be included in the planning process to ensure timely production of storytelling assets that support donor cultivation, parent engagement, and YDI's brand visibility.

Strategic Alignment with YDI's Long-Term Vision

Deepening Cultural and Civic Literacy Across YDI's Pipeline

The Cultural Leadership Academy pilot exemplifies the kind of immersive learning that strengthens the entire YDI leadership pipeline — not only for middle schoolers, but eventually for high school students (Emerging Leaders Academy) and college policy fellows. Students' reflections demonstrated early civic reasoning, empathy across cultural difference, and the ability to discuss laws, injustice, and human rights with sophistication. These skills map directly onto YDI's long-term vision of preparing youth to engage confidently in democracy at every stage of development.

Building Sustainable Cross-Community Partnerships

The success of this pilot underscores the value of relationships — both the trust built with parents and the connections made with community partners. The museum pilot illustrated how agile and community-responsive YDI's model can be. As YDI expands, experiences like this reinforce the need for infrastructure that supports multi-site cultural programming, deeper engagement with Jewish, Black, and interfaith organizations, and increased staffing to manage multi-stakeholder collaborations.

Opportunities for Future Investment

Strengthening Infrastructure to Support Scalable Field Experiences

The operational insights from the pilot clarify what is needed to scale effectively. Future investment can support dedicated logistics staff, a transportation coordination system, and stronger pre-session parent engagement (including optional orientation calls). Funding for partnerships with museums, historical institutions, and cultural centers would also allow students to experience these programs at deeper levels with tailored docent-led tours, customized materials, and follow-up curriculum.

Expanding Multi-Session Cultural Leadership Vertical

The museum learning was so impactful that parents have expressed interest in expanding the program. A five-part Cultural Leadership Track — anchored by one major field experience, three shorter learning sessions, and a final showcase — could deepen engagement and strengthen retention. Investment in this structure would allow YDI to test and refine scalable models for delivering cultural and civic leadership education across cities and states.

Expanding Cultural Learning Through Film & Storytelling

This pilot also revealed an exciting opportunity to deepen the Cultural Leadership Track through curated multimedia storytelling experiences. In conversation with cultural historian Dr. LaNitra Berger at George Mason University, YDI identified a potential partnership with the filmmakers of *Ain't No Back to a Merry-Go-Round*—a documentary that powerfully complements themes of youth activism, civil rights history, and Black–Jewish solidarity. Integrating museum visits with documentary-based dialogue would enrich student learning, diversify narrative entry points, and offer a scalable model for

schools and community groups nationwide. With investment, YDI can formalize these partnerships and expand multimedia offerings across the 5-session Cultural Leadership Track.

Conclusion

We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to pilot this initiative together. The Cultural Leadership Academy pilot demonstrated that young people are eager—and fully capable—of engaging in complex conversations about identity, justice, and shared responsibility. Despite external disruptions, the program delivered a powerful learning experience that strengthened cross-community understanding, built civic confidence, and deepened relationships among students, families, and community leaders. This pilot not only affirmed the demand for culturally grounded civic learning but also offered a clear roadmap for scaling a high-quality, research-informed program across the region. With continued investment and partnership, YDI is positioned to expand this work and help shape a new generation of thoughtful, courageous leaders.